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Skiing Scenes Add Thrills To Yul Brynner Spy Film

By JANIE S. JENKINS

Bald and beautiful Yul Brynner stars in a double-exposure spy story appropriately titled "The Double Man," which opened Wednesday at the State Theater. The suspenseful and chilling drama takes place high in the Austrian Alps, and skiing enthusiasts would do well to see it whether they like Yul or not — the settings are magnificent and makes one wish — almost — for the return of winter and skiing!

The story begins in Washington where Dan Slater (Brynner), a CIA agent, is notified that his 16-year-old son, Robert, has been killed in a skiing accident in Austria. The audience is treated (?) to a momentary flashback to the precipitous Alpine crag down which the flailing, screaming skier plunges to become a limp and bloody heap.

Because of his CIA background, Slater is convinced that the death was not accidental and leaves immediately for Austria, leaving word for his boss, Lloyd Nolan, that he will be back in 24 hours. (This seems a little incongruous, even with the speed of today's travel, but it never pays to be too analytical of today's movies. Another little thing bothered me, too: Even on the mountain peaks where the snow looked about 30 feet deep and you know it has to be cold, there was no "breath fog" when the characters spoke — maybe the atmospheric conditions are different. However. . .)

The ski school which Robert was attending is operated by a former CIA buddy of Slater's, Frank Wheatly (Clive Revill) who chickened out of the CIA 12 years previously. Even though Slater suspects everybody including Wheatly, he needs him to help unravel the strings.

Ugly Message

The first hint that the audience gets that Slater is not just paranoid but is really on the track of something big is when he finds his son's ski jacket with two bloody holes in the front. The camera moves to the tips of the ski poles and back to the jacket again, and you get the message immediately. Ugh.

Investigation reveals that there were only three other people on the lift the day Robert was killed. One of them is a blonde ski bunny played by Britt Ekland. Slater seeks her out and where she works.

Suspense is already building, and it becomes more and more obvious that the boy's death was actually a trap to "bait" Slater into the clutches of Red agents.

In the midst of a gala party to which Slater is lured, he learns from Miss Ekland the identity of one of the men who had been on the lift. He and Wheatly set out for a lonely farmhouse rendezvous with the man. Actually, he does exactly what the enemy wants him to do and he is ambushed there, captured, escapes — and the confusion begins.

Spine-Tingling Ride

From here on, you are never sure of whether Slater is Slater or "Kalmar," his "double" whom the enemy agents plan to send back to Washington in his place. Neither Wheatly or Miss Ekland are sure either.

There is a spine-tingling ride on the lift to the summit of the mountain where skiers carry flaming torches down the night-shrouded trails, looking like colored stars shooting out of the milky way. The two enemy agents are among them, and the handcuffed Slater — or is it Kalmer — watches from his hiding place in the lodge as they separate to search for him.

In the concluding scenes, poor Wheatly and Miss Ekland see Brynner confront himself as both the good guy and the bad guy, each urging Wheatly to shoot the other, or, to safeguard the security of the whole western world, shoot both of them.

Wheatly does shoot — but who knows which one he shot? The surviving Brynner goes back to Washington, leaving everyone in doubt. Will the real Dan Slater stand up, please?

The Warner Bros. film is based on Henry S. Maxfield's novel "Legacy of a Spy." It is quite suitable for general family viewing. In fact, compared to television's blood, thunder and sex projected into the living room, it is a distinct improvement and should have definite appeal to discriminating viewers.